



Dale Crawford 1985

Christmas Balloons

Christmas in Albuquerque, New Mexico, is special in many ways. I think it's due to the rich Spanish-American heritage of the area. The season starts about the first of December and is filled with parties and other events steeped in tradition. One of the most cherished traditions is the lighting of luminarias on Christmas Eve. A luminaria is elegant in its simplicity; about two inches of sand are placed in a small, brown, paper bag about four by six inches wide, with the top folded down to about eight inches high. Then a short, fat candle is placed in the center of the sand in the bottom of the bag. When the candle is lit the flame casts a soft yellow light that makes the whole bag glow.

By itself, a single luminaria isn't very impressive, but when hundreds of these simple, glowing sentinels are placed around a house they are dazzling. On Christmas Eve they are found outlining the curbs in block after block of homes in many New Mexico towns. Luminarias run along the tops of fences and outline the soft curves that are characteristic of the roof lines of adobe homes. They cascade down driveways and along sidewalks to throw soft pools of light on doorways and against walls. People come by the thousands to drive slowly through the neighborhoods with the headlights out or to stroll along the streets in small family groups. It is a special time and whether you celebrate Christ's birth or not, the luminarias bathe you in a feeling of peace and goodwill toward men.

The country club area in Albuquerque had been famous for its display of luminarias for many years when someone observed that a hot air balloon is much the same idea. You take a flame and filter the light through a fabric and you can paint magic. Why not combine the two on Christmas Eve? The sites would be the fairway of the golf course in the country club area and several empty lots and parking areas spread out through the neighborhood. Over thirty balloonists agreed to try the experiment.

At this point we had only owned Sundancer a little over a month. I had taken several lessons, but I was a long way from qualifying for a private pilot's license. This didn't matter because all the balloons would be tethered, which meant the balloons would be tied to the ground with long ropes, and this did not require a license. What did matter was that George was out of town and I would be inflating by myself, under entirely new conditions. I was both excited and apprehensive as we prepared for the evening.

The weather prediction for the evening was for low temperatures, no snow and no wind. Judy made up large pots of chili and posole. The old motor home was packed with crackers and cheese and bisconchitos. Several gallon jugs were filled with a spiced wine mixture that would be heated later in a large coffee urn. We didn't plan on getting cold or hungry. The balloon gear was once again packed into a borrowed pickup. About an hour before sundown, we headed out.

Sundancer was assigned an area in the front parking lot of the country club. As we pulled up I scanned the area. The lot was large and paved, and the entire area was surrounded by trees. The usual network of power and telephone lines laced the neighborhood, but nothing was closer than 100 feet. Several other balloons were laid out and the crews were working. Two balloons were already inflated. The organizing committee had assigned plenty of space to inflate each balloon, but we were going to have several balloons lined up in a long row parallel to the street, then a tree, and another balloon in a small lot on down the way. Everything would be OK as long as the wind didn't blow.

"What do we do now?" Judy asked as we surveyed the area.

"We have to moor the balloon at three points," I said, pointing to a large tree at the edge of the pavement. "I think we can

use that tree and spot the pickup and the motor home at the other two points."

We assembled the balloon in the center of the lot and attached three special, strong nylon ropes to the support cables just above the gondola. The opposite end of each 150 foot line was stretched to three points of a triangle. The first rope was tied solidly to the base of the tree, and the second and third ropes were tied around the rear axle of the pickup and the motor home. Tethering a balloon is ticklish. First, the job can only be done under very calm wind conditions. Second, if any breeze does come up, the balloon has to be restrained tightly so it can't flop into any trees or power lines.

I supervised every facet of the tie-down myself. The last thing I wanted was to have the ropes come loose and go flying off into the night. Admittedly, the flight would be pretty with all the city lights sparkling below, but when it came time to land, we would be feeling our way down into a dark, black pit with no way of seeing power lines. Even the thought was scary. By the time we finished the sun had set and darkness was crowding in on all sides.

"Let's start the cold inflation," I called to Philip and the engine on the inflator coughed to life. Sundancer swelled in the twilight and I watched for any sign of vagrant wind currents. The air stayed perfectly calm and the envelope filled smoothly. Judy and I walked down the sides, pulling out the fabric, and met at the crown.

"How do you feel so far?" she asked, squeezing my hand.

"A little nervous," I admitted. "Have you got any chewing gum? My mouth is bone dry."

She fished in her pocket and came up with a dog-eared stick. "This one's been here for a while. Sure you want it?"

"Right now I would chew on an old sock if I thought it would help."

We walked back to the gondola and I prepared for the hot inflation. Everything seemed to be going smoothly and I breathed a little easier. The light was fading fast, but there was still no wind. I squeezed the valve on the burner, and the thirty foot column of flame shot into the interior of the envelope. The fabric rippled with the heat waves, and a pocket of fabric billowed up from the ground. I let off on the blast valve

and the whole balloon disappeared from my sight. I mean, it was like someone had just turned off a light in a brightly lit room. I couldn't see anything in front of my face and I wanted very badly to know what was happening to the balloon envelope. The pocket of fabric I had seen forming on the bottom side of the envelope could be an indication of wind coming up. It took two to three seconds before I could see anything again.

"That's weird," Phil said from where he was holding the inflator steady.

I peered into the gloom. I could see, but the view I had was very marginal. George hadn't said anything about this. Maybe he hadn't wanted to scare me off with too many details. "I think if I can fire a couple more short bursts we can get that pocket to smooth out."

The cause of the bubble was air being sucked in under the edge of the envelope by the hot air pulling up on the fabric. I fired the blast valve again and then blinked trying to get my pupils to dilate quicker. I had to wait until I could see the interior of the balloon well enough to be sure that the next burst of flame wouldn't touch any of the fabric. It was uncomfortable working this way, but not particularly dangerous as long as I took my time. Man! Was I glad there wasn't any wind. Two more short bursts set everything up the way I wanted, I heaved a sigh of relief and turned the blast valve on full, and Sundancer heaved herself off the ground.

The balloon stood upright and settled into place. I fed heat into the envelope until the fabric was taut, but not enough heat to lift the gondola off the ground. I looked around. Our crew stood around the basket and several other people had gathered to watch. Next to us on each side, two other balloons had inflated. Darkness had settled in so the luminarias could be seen stretching in long lines down the streets.

It was strange. I had been concentrating so hard on inflating the balloon that the rest of the world had momentarily disappeared; now it seemed as if I had just stepped back from off stage into a scene. A balloon named Raggedy Anne had inflated right next to us. The balloon looked like a huge patchwork quilt. Whenever they fired the burner the whole balloon glowed. Next to it was Small World; this balloon was done in a basic light blue, with maps of all the continents sewn on. Just

over beyond some trees in the parking lot stood a large, solid red balloon named Angel Wings. It looked like a huge blinking Christmas tree light.

About eight to ten balloons were strung out along the fairway on the golf course. Occasionally they rose and fell in a slow rhythm as the pilots lifted them up to the limits of the tether ropes and then let them settle slowly to the ground. Luminarias were around all the nearby houses, and the roof of the club house behind us was lined with them. Off into the distance, lines of thousands of luminarias stretched, and far down the street I could see the tops of three more balloons above the trees. The smell of burning piñon wood drifted through the air and occasionally I could spot some Christmas tree lights through a window.

"Here, have a cup of coffee." Judy handed me a steaming mug and a *bisconchito*. For those of you who are not from the Southwest, this is a lightly flavored licorice cookie that goes just right with a hot cup of coffee.

Long lines of cars started arriving and people wandered in from the dark to stare up into the interior of the balloon for a while, say a few words, and then disappear back into the darkness to wander on to gaze at the houses. Once the balloon was up, there wasn't a whole lot to do. About every fifteen seconds or so, I fed some heat into the balloon and checked the tautness of the fabric. The crew took turns sitting on the edge of the gondola to be sure there was enough weight to keep Sundancer on the ground. Occasionally we would lift up and down the limit of the tether ropes two or three times as people on the ground stared up with open mouths. Judy and the boys relieved me from time to time so I could go into the motor home and warm up.

The goodies in the motor home did a brisk business. As the hours went by friends from town and other balloonists dropped in to warm up for a few minutes and the pots were emptied and were refilled with fresh gallons of chile and posole from the cupboard. The hot spiced wine tended to sneak up on you. One cup was OK, but a second one made you weave a little as you walked down the street.

"Let's take a walk," I told Judy as Phil climbed into the gondola to take his turn. We stopped by Raggedy Anne and

Small World and then headed down the fairway. Around each balloon stood tight groups of people who greeted us as we came up. The scene changed constantly as we walked, with new views appearing as we passed each street. Overhead, balloons danced with glowing bursts of color, constantly shifting in perspective to each other and the surrounding pattern of luminarias.

All balloonists share a common bond of friendship, and tonight it was in full bloom. Many of them had already been by our motor home and more food appeared out of the dark at each stop. We returned to Sundancer and still the people came. I sat on the edge of the gondola, watching their silhouettes moving against the luminarias, listening to soft Christmas music drifting from the motor home, and felt totally at peace.

It was a night everyone hated to bring to a close but one-by-one the balloons ran out of fuel, dropped to the ground and were packed up. People stopped by as they finished and we hugged each other and talked about the beauty of the scene and laughed a lot. Too soon it was our turn as the last of the fuel sputtered from the tanks and Sundancer drooped to the ground.

We packed up and joined the rest of the crowd around the last few balloons, still not wanting to leave, savoring the last few moments. One-by-one the balloons winked out and as the last one fell gracefully to the grass, we looked around. The luminarias still flickered by the thousands as we returned the night to their vigil. Overhead the sky was packed with stars. The steam from our breath floated on the cold night air. The pungent smell of wood smoke mixed in with the odor of chili drifting in from somewhere. We bid our crew "Merry Christmas" and then I took Judy's hand and we gathered our family around and walked the streets among the soft lights. No one said much, but we were closely bound together by what we had seen and done that night.

I breathed in the cold crisp air and thought, "We're lucky, so lucky to be here and to see and be part of this. Whatever happens in the years to come, we'll have the memories of this night forever. What better Christmas present could you ask for?"